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Influence and Free Will

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Influence and Free Will

Libertarians commit themselves to the view that environmental and psychological factors influence our decisions and behavior without determining them. Libertarians hold that, though our desires, our needs, our beliefs, and our communities have a great deal to say about our choices and our behavior, each human being has a free will that can choose which desires and environmental influences ultimately to listen to. This seems a very sensible position. After all, our everyday conversation takes something like it for granted. This view forms the basis for much of our philosophizing about morality, responsibility, and the meaning of life. However, when an attempt is made to explain *how* environmental and psychological factors influence free decisions without determining them, real difficulties with the libertarian view become evident. Philosophical analysis of the relationship between influence and free will exposes a fundamental incoherence within the libertarian position. Since much of our thinking in other significant areas presently depends on the basic libertarian assumption of influenced but undetermined behavior, it is in our best interest to see what could be done to resolve this incoherence. And, if it cannot be resolved, we must find another basic assumption to replace the libertarian one while still making possible our deep convictions about the truth of morality, responsibility, and the meaning of life.

To see the libertarians' problem for what it is, we first need fully to understand libertarian conceptions of influence and free will, as well as what sort of interaction between them libertarians believe in and why this belief is essential to the viability of the libertarian position as a whole. We know that under the libertarian view, decisions are essentially autonomous. A person may choose to do one thing, but that by no means excludes the possibility that he could

have done something else. The person with free will has two or more options clearly in front of him and may choose any one of them. He is not *determined*, by his childhood or his present psychology or anything else, to do any one of these things. He is free to choose whatever he wills. Even if he has a strong desire for one option, he may choose not to satisfy that desire. Thus the common understanding of free will is that even when we choose to do one thing, we could have chosen to do something else.

Yet libertarians do not believe that a person can choose to do absolutely *anything*. Libertarians, as well as determinists, are cognizant of human limitations. In the first place, they recognize that a person cannot make a choice to do something that she does not know exists. For instance, I cannot choose to live in France if I don't know that there is such a place. And I can only choose to live in the United States because I know that the United States exists. Knowledge of the world is not "influence" on one's decisions in the way we are eventually going to talk about influence, but it is the background information that makes any choice possible. Awareness of the options is a prerequisite for one's ability to choose among them. For a person to be able to choose a certain option, it must occur to her, and ideas for courses of action occur to us because of our familiarity with the world. There are causal connections going on at this level—objects in the world affect our senses and then our brains and so present an array of options to us—but the causal chains lead only to the presentation of the options to our consciousness. At this point, we are not talking about the world telling us which option to choose or causing us to choose one over another. Our decision is *about* things causally represented to us, but it is not itself caused by these things.

Yet our decisions *are* often justified with reasons. In fact, the more important a decision, the more necessary we feel good reasons to be. If I am choosing between a cherry popsicle and a

grape one, I may worry very little whether I have reasons for choosing one over the other. For all I care, my decision can be random (eenie-meenie-minie-moe...), or determined by factors completely unrelated to the event and wholly subconscious. Cherry or grape doesn't make a whole lot of difference to me. On the other hand, if I am choosing whom to marry, having good reasons seems a bit more important. I want to marry a man whom I love, who loves me, whose company I enjoy, who will make a good father, a man whose life goals are compatible with my own, etc. If these are all of my criteria for making my decision, then when faced with the opportunity to commit myself to a certain person, I consider the ways in which he fulfills these criteria. And the ways in which he fits and does not fit them become my reasons for and against marrying him.

In a decision made in this way, the state of the world (or at least the way I perceive its state) has a great deal to say about the outcome of my decision. If the man under consideration *is* a certain way, I will marry him. If he is *not* a certain way, I will not marry him. The way the world is makes a big difference to the way in which I decide. This is certainly to be expected; it is to be *desired*. Making decisions without the facts is a silly way to go through life and certainly makes a person's decisions seem less significant. What does it matter if I choose to marry Bill over Bob if I know nothing about them to distinguish one from the other? My choice is random, meaning I am not really choosing one thing over against another because Bill and Bob are practically identical in my mind.

As we consider the difference between making a decision with the facts and making one without the facts, we begin to see the significance of reasons. Reasons are our articulation of the relevant differences between two or more options. Why do I choose Bill over Bob? Because Bill acts more lovingly toward me than Bob. Or because Bill is more exciting than Bob. Or both. But

whatever the reasons in a particular case, the significance of a decision stems from one's perception of relevant differences between the options (a perception which is in turn dependent on one's perception of general facts about the options and the world of which they are a part). A decision truly is significant as *my* decision when the reasons are *my* reasons, when the differences between Bill and Bob matter to *me*.

It might be noted that some of our most difficult decisions are those between two sets of equally strong reasons. I am certainly not arguing that *these* decisions are insignificant. When I say there must be "relevant differences" between the options, I do not mean that there must be a difference in the intensity of pull from reasons on either side, but rather that the content of the reasons on the two sides must be different. The significance of such a decision is created by a conflict between two or more different values that are separately very important to me. The question is which value will ultimately prove more important, and the outcome will normally have tremendous effects on my future life: what kind of person I will be, what future choices I will be likely to make, etc. In any case, I believe we have sufficiently established that the existence of significant differences in outcomes makes a decision significant.

In the Bill and Bob scenario, it might be suggested that if I was suddenly presented with a new piece of knowledge about Bill—perhaps that his affection for me is only a thin veil over an angry heart that will lash out as soon as I do something to annoy him—my decision would be swayed toward Bob. One might say this new information "influenced" my decision. This is certainly one way in which we commonly use the word "influence." However, this sort of influence is not going to cause problems for the libertarian position. This new knowledge about Bill only changes my decision because of the criteria *I* have established and given value to. Though this new information affects my decision *because of the criteria I have previously*

chosen, I could choose not to marry Bob by choosing new criteria, new values. Though from one angle it looks as though the facts of the situation determine my choice, from another angle, it is clear that my valuation of the various facts is what is decisive. And the libertarian desires to say that I can choose to change my criteria at any time. I am not bound to any one set of values. What makes a reason for my decision is entirely dependent on what I choose to value. That is why it is *my* decision, and that is why it is free and autonomous. The facts by themselves do not guarantee one decision or another. It is my ranking of the importance of various facts that in the end decides.

Now, however, we must move to examine an even deeper level of choice. Our focus turns from the facts which are determined by the state of the world to the origin of one's criteria for evaluating the relative importance of these facts. This is where the decision-making is truly taking place. This is where the self, having perceived the world, chooses how to react to it according to the self's own values. And our greatest question becomes how the self chooses its values.

Obviously some of our values may stem from other, more basic, ones. For example, I may value sleep because it enables me to stay healthy. I may value health because it allows me to accomplish my other goals, perhaps having a successful career or raising a family. Eventually, however, these chains of values must come to a beginning, to some fundamental value choice which one can simply not explain, at least not in a non-circular fashion. These most basic and fundamental values are not formed on the basis of any other reasons.

To get an idea of what these ultimate value commitments might look like, let's consider two highly simplified people: a man whose highest priority is himself and a woman whose highest priority is others. The reasons for all of their actions seem to lead back to these

fundamental values. Even if this man sometimes helps others, he does so because it helps him to have others pleased with him. And even when this woman takes care of herself, she does so because she knows she will be of no help to others if she's not healthy herself. Neither of these people can give any deeper, explanatory reasons for why they prefer their own interests over others' or others' interests over their own. The value of helping oneself or helping others seems completely self-evident to the respective parties. There are no non-circular *reasons* to be given.

But although it seems relatively clear that we cannot give deeper reasons for why we value ourselves or others more highly, I think that libertarians will nonetheless agree with me that there are *influences* on the direction in which this choice is made. There are things that influence which reasons become *our* reasons, which reasons can actually convince us and motivate us to do something. Libertarians will of course not agree that these influences *determine* the value judgment that is made—i.e. they will leave room for some autonomy—but they will accept that certain circumstances have a limited effect on our value formation.

The most important of the influences on our core value formation is probably moral training. It hardly needs repeating that children raised by parents who are excellent moral examples are more likely to lead moral lives. Children learn by imitation, and it seems that values as well as actions can be passed from parents to offspring. This does not mean—and the libertarian is quick to emphasize this—that children raised in moral homes *always* turn out to have excellent moral character as adults. Neither does it mean that children raised under negative influences can never turn out well. Rather, when we look at the human population as a whole, it seems that there is a tendency for certain environments to result in certain characters. The libertarians will say that one's childhood environment does not *determine* one's adult choices—at a certain age, it seems one can choose either to accept or reject the values of one's parents—

but one's childhood can make one tend in a certain direction. Surely we all believe that this is so or we would not take such great pains to set good examples for our children. There is an undeniable consensus that one's upbringing is a pull on one's value choices, even if the final decision is ultimately a personal one.¹

But we do not only set examples for our children. We also talk to them about values, about being kind to others, sharing with others, accepting the word "no" without tantrums. The older our children get, the more we are able to reason with them, to set before them their alternatives and explain to them why they should choose one thing rather than another. And of course we reason with adults as well. Talking with one another and even interacting on a more emotional level is expected to be of some use. Persuasion is expected to be effectual in at least some cases, or we would never bother to attempt it. Yet at the same time that we hope our words (and, in some cases, our love) make an impression on a person, we acknowledge that she makes the final decision. Nothing we can do can guarantee that she will decide to see things our way.

There are other influences on the formation and reformation of our values. Sometimes certain situations cause us to become open to new values. Being faced with death or a period of intense suffering may cause us to reevaluate the things we most desire in our lives, though we ultimately choose whether to allow suffering to produce perseverance or bitterness in us.

Children whose lives are void of good role models have a greater chance of turning around if

¹ There is a separate argument for the rejection of libertarianism based on the fact that we normally assume babies start out completely determined by their genes and environment and only later—perhaps when they have developed into adolescents—develop a truly autonomous will. Peter Strawson writes, "Would it not be grotesque to think of the development of the child as a progressive or patchy emergence from an area in which its behavior is in this sense determined into an area in which it isn't?" ("Freedom and Resentment," in *Free Will*, ed. Gary Watson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 75.) Though I'm not sure such a theory would be "grotesque," I can see how it would certainly be somewhat strange. How odd to think that one's physical and psychological development actually determines at what age one will be able to act "freely." Strawson continues, "Whatever sense of 'determined' is required for stating the thesis of determinism, it can scarcely be such as to allow of compromise, borderline-style answers to the question, 'Is this bit of behavior determined or isn't it?' But in this matter of young children, it is essentially a borderline, penumbral area that we move in." (Ibid.)

positive examples enter their lives, but they must choose whether to accept or reject the help offered. Repeat criminal offenders are more likely to commit another crime than those without criminal records, but that does not mean that they cannot at some point choose to change their behavior.

All around us we see examples of this coexistence of influence and choice. According to statistics, certain people are very likely to do one thing; yet they remain free not to do it. This is our very common, everyday understanding of our interaction with the world, and it is the understanding that libertarians affirm. They recognize causality in the world yet also believe that personal freedom of choice is undeniable. To deserve the name libertarians, they must believe that, though one's environment and one's psychological states influence one's choices, they do not *force* one to make certain decisions. The ability to do otherwise, to act against one's influences, is the very essence of libertarianism. At the same time, to deny the presence of influence on our fundamental value choices would be flatly to contradict the obvious correlations between environments and decisions made. A libertarian position that did this would have to be rejected by all. So libertarians are committed to saying that both influence and free will play a role in developing our fundamental values.

Now that we have at least a basic picture of the sort of influence libertarians acknowledge, we can begin to examine various methods of explaining the interaction of influence and free will in the formation of our foundational values. How is it that external facts or internal psychological states could influence our values without determining them?² That is,

² Some libertarians might argue that they don't have to have a model or explanation of this interaction to be justified in believing it exists. They might cast their lot with philosopher Peter van Inwagen who asserts something similar in his essay "Free Will Remains a Mystery" (in *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, ed. Robert Kane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)). But I think the libertarian problem is deeper than not simply being able to describe how free will and influence interact. I believe the libertarians have trouble making sense of the idea of free will at all. What is this thing that they are postulating in addition to influence? How can they limit influence so that it doesn't determine one's actions while not making free will equal to arbitrariness? How is it that an influence can *explain* an

what makes the influences on “free” human decisions function differently than the influences on determined human decisions or the determined decisions of animals? How does free will look when it becomes a part of what, in other cases and in other organisms, is a deterministic process?

I am going to present two possible ways that influence and free will could relate to each other. First, they could relate in a combinatory way. External and internal factors could theoretically enter some sort of complicated calculus in the brain that determines how they interact with each other and which value finally dominates. Free will would enter this calculus either by creating the formula for combination or by being plugged in as a particular variable. Second, influence and free will could relate in a probabilistic manner, for which quantum physics serves as an example.

The combinatory model is a variation on a portion of the model of decision-making put forth by Robert Nozick, among others.³ This model views the decision of a particular agent as being affected by various influences and reasons that pull the agent in one direction or another. This is the libertarians’ concession to the causal character of the world. However, these influences and reasons do not *determine* the decision of the agent, because the agent decides how much weight each influence or reason gets. We spoke about decision-making in a similar way when we were paring reasons for decisions down to fundamental values. We said that an agent’s values were what assigned weights to the available reasons or influences. What we must now try

action without determining it? Libertarians end up having to give up explanation in order to retain their position, not because the explanation is on a mysterious higher plane that we are simply incapable of understanding, not because we need more imagination or a paradigm shift, but because an autonomous action *is* unexplained and so arbitrary and random. The libertarian position is inexplicable *by definition*, and I suppose it is the primary purpose of this paper to make that clear. If libertarians are completely fine with having no explanations for certain phenomena, I suppose there is little I can say to them here. I could argue for determinism on other grounds, but I won’t do so in this paper.

³ “Choice and Indeterminism,” in *Agents, Causes, & Events: Essays on Indeterminism and Free Will*, ed. Timothy O’Connor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 101-104.

to do is determine how the decisions about those very fundamental values are *influenced* by outside forces without being *determined* by them.

We want not only a model of how influences affect our decisions to act in particular situations but also a model of how influences affect our choices of the deepest principles that guide all those other, more surface-level decisions. Unfortunately, the popular model of influence and free will becomes less useful in this situation because it recedes into an infinite regress. We may be able to explain why a certain influence does not determine a person's decision, but we must then ask why the person decided to assign that influence the weight he did. So we ask about influences on how he assigns weights. But those influences are also qualified by the weights he freely assigns them. The regress continues, and wherever we choose to put a stop to it—perhaps at the level of our most fundamental value judgments—there will be an assignment of weights that is *not influenced at all*.⁴ To avoid an infinite regress, the combinatory model must accept that the most fundamental value choice is uninfluenced. And since we've already established that the libertarian must accept that even our most basic value judgments *are* influenced, this simple explanation is obviously inadequate.

We might consider whether there are some variations on this combinatory model that would be more acceptable. I can see two other ways the combinatory model might be used. In neither of them would free will be the assigner of weights. Each influence on a decision would come with its own intrinsic weight (the degree or size of the influence) due to a myriad of environmental and psychological factors such as how long one is exposed to the influence, how

⁴ Galen Strawson makes a similar argument against libertarianism; he articulates the infinite regress of self-determination. One's decisions are determined by oneself, but what determines the self? It must also be determined by a decision of a self that is also determined by another self by another. He writes, "True self-determination is logically impossible because it requires the actual completion of an infinite regress of choices of principles of choice." ("Libertarianism, Action, and Self-Determination" in *Agents, Causes, & Events: Essays on Indeterminism and Free Will*, ed. Timothy O'Connor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995)).

emotionally receptive one is to it, etc. Yet this decision would not be completely determined by these influences because there would be an additional variable in the calculus producing the decision. The direction (positive or negative) of this variable would be left completely undetermined by anything in the outside world and wholly up to the agent's self. In one variation of the model, this autonomously chosen variable would also have a size (or "weight") controlled solely by the deciding agent. In the other variation, outside factors would determine the size of the variable whose direction is still chosen autonomously. That is, other influences could either be so small that the autonomous variable carries the day completely or so large that the autonomous variable can really make no difference at all in the circumstances. (The relative size of the autonomous variable could also be somewhere in between.)

Unfortunately, neither of these combinatory models is any more helpful than the original in describing an adequate relationship between influence and free will. In each case, we are left with a portion of the decision whose ultimate direction and perhaps even weight is completely uninfluenced. The nature of the combinatory models is to enumerate all of the possible environmental or psychological influences on a decision and *separate* them from an additional completely uninfluenced factor. When we model autonomous choice in this way, however, the uninfluenced element which was included in order to account for freedom and autonomy comes out looking highly arbitrary. Because it is completely uninfluenced by things in the world (since we've separately accounted for all of the influences), this autonomous choice has no explanation. There is absolutely nothing in the environment or in the person's psyche that explains a completely uninfluenced choice. The choice is, by definition of our model, completely unrelated to the world and to the person's other choices.

But, it might be asked, couldn't the completely uninfluenced voice be explained on the basis of *reasons*, though not by influences? No. The type of decision we are considering here is a choice of ultimate, fundamental value. Our deciding agent *has* no reasons, at least no noncircular ones. We are discussing situations akin to that of the man whose highest priority is himself and that of the woman whose highest priority is others. It is precisely *because* they have no noncircular reasons for their choices that we appealed to influences for an explanation. But the various combinatory models, in attempting to preserve free will in conjunction with these influences, have not been able to avoid positing a completely inexplicable portion of a decision: a portion explicable neither by reasons nor by influences. This is a decision necessarily cut off from the rest of the world, inexplicable by reasons and influences and so arbitrary. It could even be called random, in the sense of being completely and utterly unpredictable.

Interestingly enough, "random" does not always mean metaphysically completely undetermined. A die falls on one face or another based on its starting position, on how it was thrown, even on the positions and velocities of the air molecules around it. Yet its final position is still termed "epistemologically random," because the result was determined by factors unknown by (and unimportant to) those throwing the die. People choose to decide something by lot because they see no good *reason* to make the decision one way or the other. Something being chosen at random doesn't mean the outcome is not determined by physical laws, only that we aren't aware of exactly the effect those physical laws will have. A purely autonomous choice like that described by the combinatory model makes our most basic decisions random in the sense that they are undetermined by the very things that matter. (This could even be thought of as a third type of randomness in addition to the metaphysical and epistemological kinds.) On this model, our most basic decisions are not determined by our desires, by our needs, by the facts, or

by others' interests. They are determined by an autonomous "self" that takes into account *none* of these things. This autonomous self has become autonomous even from itself (from its desires, feelings, etc.) and makes decisions completely disconnected from the most important factors of the situation. It is difficult even to see what significance postulating a self disconnected from all reason or influence could have. A "self" that is postulated simply to explain arbitrary events (events left undetermined by the important factors of a situation) takes on that arbitrariness as its defining characteristic.⁵

Robert Kane argues, however, that choices undetermined by the most relevant environmental and psychological factors can still escape the accusation of arbitrariness. In an article summarizing his book *The Significance of Free Will*, Kane describes a case in which a person is pulled equally towards two different actions:

There is tension and uncertainty in our minds about what to do at [certain] times that, I suggest, is reflected in appropriate regions of our brains by movement away from thermodynamic equilibrium—in short, a kind of stirring up of chaos in the brain that makes it sensitive to micro-indeterminacies at the neuronal level. Thus, the uncertainty and inner tension we feel at such soul-searching moments of self-formation is reflected in the indeterminacy of our neural processes.... When we do decide under such conditions of uncertainty, the outcome is not determined because of the preceding indeterminacy—and yet it can be willed (and hence rational and voluntary) either way owing to the fact that in such self-formation, the agents' prior wills are divided by conflicting motives.⁶

Kane goes on to say that, "under such conditions, the choices either way will not be inadvertent, accidental, capricious, or merely random because they will be *willed* by the agents either way when they are made, and done for *reasons* either way—reasons that the agents then and there endorse."⁷ Choices made in this way Kane calls "self-forming willings" or "SFWs."

⁵ Galen Strawson offers a similar line of reasoning in "The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility," *Philosophical Studies* 75 (1994): 5-24.

⁶ "Free Will and Responsibility: Ancient Dispute, New Themes," *The Journal of Ethics* 4 (Dec. 2000): 319.

⁷ *Ibid.*: 320.

In general, I think Kane's idea is a smart one. Something like this has to be defended by libertarians. And yet I am not sure that Kane really provides any evidence that should convince us that these choices are not arbitrary or random as well as indeterminate. I believe complete indeterminacy entails the arbitrariness of a choice. Some libertarians may feel they completely disagree with me on this point and may believe that it will be the ultimate impasse of our debate. Yet I think most if not all libertarians *do* equate indeterminism and arbitrariness. That is why they have been so eager to develop theories of agent causation. They see the difficulty with undetermined choices and actions and attempt to escape the problem by saying these choices and actions *are* determined by something: agents. As I have already said, I don't think this sort of agency escapes arbitrariness, the arbitrariness simply being transferred from choice to agent, but let us see how Kane tries to save the significance of indeterminate choices by saying they are *willed*.

Kane points out that SFWs orient an agent's whole future life in one direction rather than another. In view of this fact, I believe the agent can be said to "will" the indeterminate (and arbitrary) act of choice; after all, the agent does *act* on the choice, does incorporate that choice into the very core of his future being. I am arguing that even if the agent does not choose one way or the other due to specific influences or reasons being intrinsically stronger than others, the choice can be significant because it truly forms the agent's future character and trajectory of action. But though this is the way I believe Kane's insights should be put to work—to elaborate on the creation of self within the deterministic worldview—Kane thinks his explanations are grounds for belief in free will. He does an excellent job of explaining the formation of selfhood but doesn't have any evidence to convince us that the choice is *made* by a self and not just

creative of a self who wills in that particular way. That is, it is not obvious that what Kane describes as SFWs are not simply willing selves made by indeterminate brain events.⁸

In addition, if Kane is going to maintain that an agent can actually be “willing” a physically random event so that the agent is the ultimate source of that choice, there seems to be no reason that an agent could not also be the ultimate source of a physically determined event. As Bernard Berofsky writes, “A compatibilist believes that, if the agent is in charge under indetermination, then, barring some special freedom-undermining consideration, he is also in charge under determination. Causes are not agents that take over in a way that undermines the putative agent of a voluntary action.”⁹

But whether or not Kane’s view of agency could also be applied to determined choices, his attribution of free willing to situations where the reasons and influences themselves do not determine an outcome is still problematic for many libertarians. Susan Wolf in particular has been especially critical of the view that the important concept of freedom is one as ultimately undetermined by reasons and influences as that described by Kane and by the combinatorial models. Wolf concerns herself especially with the type of free will that we need in order to make sense of morality. For an act to be morally praiseworthy, she says, it should be based on moral facts. Wolf considers the case of a generous man:

...it seems that what reasons he *has* for being generous depends on what reasons there *are*.

If the man’s character is determined in this way, however, it seems absurd to say that it is not under his control. His character is determined on the basis of his reasons, and

⁸ The same problem plagues Nozick’s “self-subsuming” decisions which he describes as bestowing weights to reasons “on the basis of a then chosen conception of oneself and one’s appropriate life, a conception that includes bestowing those weights and choosing that conception.” He claims that “[s]uch a self-subsuming decision will not be a random brute fact; it will be explained as an instance of the very conception and weights chosen.” Yet Nozick also acknowledges that there is no explanation for why one self-subsuming decision happened rather than another. There seems to be no reason that Nozick’s decisions could not also be instances of physically random events determining one’s future self. (“Choice and Indeterminism,” 101-114.)

⁹ “Ultimate Responsibility in a Deterministic World,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 60 (Jan. 2000): 138.

his reasons are determined by what reasons there are. What is not under his control, then, is that generosity be a virtue, and it is only because he realizes this that he remains a generous man. But one cannot say for *this* reason that his generosity is not praiseworthy. This is the best reason for being generous that a person could have.¹⁰

Let me try to put Wolf's ideas into the language I've been using. When she says that what reasons we have are based on what reasons exist, she seems to be saying that our fundamental value commitments—such as making others our highest priority—can be explained by moral *facts*: the fact that valuing others is *right*, for example. Moral facts could actually be thought of as *influences* on our decisions, and Wolf wants to say that such influences, even if they *determine* our actions (since we presumably cannot *choose* what is right, at least when it comes to the most fundamental things), are to be welcomed. Wolf is saying that we should not attempt to reduce a decision to an arbitrary choice, even if we can “attribute” that arbitrary choice to a particular agent. Our world doesn't need people who can act completely arbitrarily. What we need are people who act according to values that are truly morally superior, people who are, in fact, completely influenced to the point of being determined by the brute moral facts of the world. Our personal desire should be to get fully in touch with those moral facts so they *can* fully determine our values and actions. Wolf says that having moral facts determine our fundamental value judgments is no fault at all, certainly no offense to the basic values that lead us to desire free will in the first place. Choices need not be undetermined, only determined by the right things. Or, as Wolf puts it, “The freedom necessary for responsibility is a freedom *within* the world, not a freedom *from* it.”¹¹ Wolf's “Reason View” of free will “requires that the agent be

¹⁰ “Asymmetrical Freedom,” in *Moral Responsibility*, ed. John Martin Fischer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 232.

¹¹ *Freedom Within Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 93.

able to act in accordance with Reason, and part of what it *is* to act in accordance with Reason is to be sensitive and responsive to relevant changes in one's situation and environment...."¹²

In any case, we can recognize that there are libertarians who see the problems with reducing choices to an ultimately arbitrary decision. Arbitrariness seems entirely opposed to our desire to make decisions based on true facts about the world. At the same time, most libertarians, including even Susan Wolf, want to say that human beings can still act against true moral facts even when they are fully aware of them.¹³ This belief continues to distinguish these libertarians from determinists, and it continues to make an adequate model of the integration of influence and free will necessary.

The combinatory model has proved inadequate in all of its variations because of its basic program to separate influence and free will, if only at the lowest possible level. I mentioned that we might be able to construct a probabilistic model of the relationship between influence and free will; it seems that probabilities might better be able to integrate influence and autonomy so we are not left with any completely arbitrary choice. Nozick, whom I mentioned in connection with the combinatory model, himself advocates a probabilistic variation on it. He bases this probabilistic model of ultimate value choice on an analogy with quantum mechanics.

The highly fruitful equations of quantum physics imply that the basic element of reality is not some tiny bits of matter that exist and interact in determinate ways that could be predicted by someone with complete knowledge of the system. Rather, fundamental reality seems to consist of waves of probability governing how and where particles will be observed. Instead of particles bouncing around and bumping into one another, there are probability waves that at times

¹² Ibid., 69.

¹³ I personally do not think of morality as consisting of "facts." I prefer to think of morality as primarily love, and I take issue with the idea that when one is fully and wholly loved one would choose to be unloving. I believe that we

interfere with one another and at other times “collapse” into observable form. The aspect of quantum mechanics most relevant to our present discussion is the unpredictable nature of these probability waves. We can shoot an electron out of a precisely aimed gun and yet never be able to predict exactly where it will strike a wall. The electron does not move out from the gun as a particle but as a wave, and which location of the wave front will eventually manifest the electron as it hits the wall is impossible to tell.

Many have interpreted the unpredictability of the most fundamental level of physical reality (that we know of) as support for libertarianism.¹⁴ After all, if the most basic elements of our universe are not determined, certainly there is no reason to believe that human choices must be determined. We might try to think of influence on an autonomous choice as a probability wave. Influences around us might make it 30% likely we’ll choose one value and 70% likely we’ll choose its opposite. But those influences do not dictate which of the two values we will actually decide on. That decision, it appears, can be left up to us without violating any necessary physical laws.

Unfortunately, the quantum analogy brings us back to the same fundamental arbitrariness of the combinatorial method. Though probabilities *seem* to influence the behavior of, for example, an electron, these influences never *make* the electron go anywhere. The probabilities tell us where it might go, where most electrons have gone in the past, but they never *directly cause* the electron to manifest itself at any one point. Now the libertarians have obviously taken this to be the virtue of the quantum analogy—influence without determination—but the reality is that the electron does finally collapse to a determinate state. It is finally observed to be either here or there. And this is a great mystery to physicists. According to the Schrödinger equation, no

cannot help being drawn to love, and I believe our hope for moral improvement in society at large lies not in teaching moral facts but in loving.

determinate state should ever manifest itself; there should be no collapse. Physicists are still searching for what could possibly explain this phenomenon. They want an explanation and realize that they do not have it. If the libertarians are going to use quantum mechanics as a model of human decision-making, they also are going to have to acknowledge a factor missing from their explanation.¹⁵ Despite any combination of probabilistic influences, there is always the chance, however slight, that some other decision could have been made. Again, this is what the libertarians take to be the virtue of this model.

Some libertarians even argue that a probability can be viewed as giving a full explanation for an event when the probability is higher than 50%. The only events (or actions) inexplicable on this view are those that had a low probability, and the libertarian simply accepts that such inexplicable actions are sometimes taken. Yet I fail to see the logic of this view of probabilistic explanation. Even if there is a high probability of a certain action being chosen and performed, I feel that simply asserting the high probability is an incomplete explanation. The question of why the low probability event didn't happen instead remains unanswered, since after all it *could* have happened given only the probabilities. And I cannot see how this lack of explanation could possibly be an asset. This lack of explanation does not result from ignorance. It is not as though there are perfectly good but undiscoverable reasons why a person yields to one influence and not another. We've used the probabilistic model to account for *all* the influences and reasons as *probabilities*, and so the final determining factor that is necessary to produce the definite

¹⁴ E.g., see the quote from Robert Kane on page 13.

¹⁵ It is not that I believe all events must necessarily have complete explanations. I rather believe that there *are* explanations available for human actions and we are odd to be prejudiced against accepting them, against identifying with the reasons there are when they seem very rational and complete. Yet libertarians insist that we as selves are distinct from explanations, are instead some sort of self-explanatory explanation. I confess I simply don't see the need to hold such a position.

outcome cannot be an influence or a reason. But what is there besides a reason or an influence that is not irrational, inexplicable, arbitrary, or random?

Libertarians would like to say that asking what finally causes one influence to be effective rather than another is inappropriate because it begs the entire question of determinism. But do libertarians think denying that there is an answer to the question makes their position more tenable? Rather, *especially* if there is no answer to the question of what causes one influence to be effective and another not, the final determinate decision is arbitrary. If some choice could just as easily have turned out in the opposite way given all the relevant influences and reasons, then the outcome *is* arbitrary, random, inexplicable, or irrational. Either relevant facts, feelings, and desires determined a particular choice or they did not. If they did not, only *irrelevant* things can be put in their place. Libertarians want to avoid arbitrariness, as well they should, but it can only be avoided if the really important things—the facts of a situation, our desires, our feelings—*do* determine our actions. The *only* rationality in a decision comes from influences and reasons. That is why libertarians cannot deny their importance; the final arbitrariness of human decisions on the libertarian view would be immediately exposed for what it is. The elements that disguise the absurdity of “free will” are precisely the elements to which the libertarians do not want to cede complete control. Yet they must realize that taking control from influences and reasons does not add value to one’s decisions but only subtracts it by introducing randomness. There is nothing else to which to give control but to a random and arbitrary self, and that is certainly not the sort of self we normally strive to be.

I cannot agree with those who say that the philosophy of free will lends dignity to the human condition. Though we are often much more arbitrary and random in our decisions than is comfortable to contemplate at length and our decisions are often determined by factors we would

think appallingly irrelevant if we were conscious of them, this is not something to be hailed as a virtue. Our inability to be completely aware of all of our motivations in decision-making is a constant stumbling block to humanity even if it is, as I suspect, the only way our brains could possibly function as helpfully as they do.

Yet insofar as we are seeking an ideal for the human race, we must not look to “freedom” of the will which is at bottom only the introduction of randomness or at least of irrelevant factors into decision-making but to an ideal in which the most relevant facts, emotions, desires, and especially moral realities determine our decisions. Why should we ever want our actions and decisions to be divorced from these things, ever to be determined by something *apart* from them?¹⁶ Determinism deeply connects our decisions to the world and to our selves which are in turn formed by that world, and I believe it thus enables us to enrich our beliefs in morality, responsibility, and the essential significance of life beyond the common libertarian understanding. In the remainder of this essay, I will set about to describe a particular interpretation of determinism that I believe far surpasses libertarianism in its ability to found a meaningful and moral worldview.

First, my brand of determinism is fundamentally an identification of the self’s choices with an interaction—a relation—of external and internal influences. Each of these influences has its own weight, determined by such factors as how long one is exposed to it, to what degree it is interfered with by other influences, etc.—i.e. determined by factors actually present in one’s environment and one’s psychology. Determinism framed in such a way means that I make choices not arbitrarily (i.e. simply because I do) but because of who I am, an identity that has in

¹⁶ There may be some concern that refusing to identify our selves as authors of arbitrary events does not get rid of the arbitrariness in the universe but simply externalizes it, moves it beyond our control. Yet what I desire to get across in this paper is that we do not have control over indeterminate events any more than we have control over

turn been formed by my environment. Essentially, the determinism I hold emphasizes the self's connection with the world (the self *as* connection between various pieces of the world), and I believe this is far superior to identifying the self with an arbitrary choice thought to be above the give-and-take of the rest of the natural order. Locating the self within the relationships among myriad internal and external influences makes the idea of self infinitely more meaningful than it can ever be under libertarianism.

At the same time, I believe it is necessary to clarify that my determinism is not a view that one's past determines all of one's future choices. I don't believe—and this strictly on the basis of evidence to the contrary—that just because one had a rotten childhood one is going to turn out rotten. I do believe, however, that if one is *not* going to turn out rotten, one needs some positive influences in one's life. People can only act out of love, for example, if they know what it is. And I don't mean knowing in the sense of having the word in one's vocabulary. I mean knowing in the sense of having felt love and so being empowered to give it to others. So my determinism draws a distinction between one influence, perhaps one's rotten childhood, and the whole of the present influences on one's life. One's childhood does not alone determine one's present value system and the resulting decisions. So many other things go into making up one's self. And there is always the possibility of change caused by new influences. My determinism does not give complete control to any one kind of influence but only recognizes that when all the influences interact, our values, decisions, and self are thus produced.

I must also add that I don't think the fact that we are “determined” will ever permit us perfectly to predict the actions of others since we cannot ever know all of the influential variables in a decision. Most of the time we don't even know half of the variables determining

determinate events. Perhaps we *are*, as beings, created by and identified with both indeterminate and determinate events, but we should not think indeterminacy is somehow preferable to determinacy.

our *own* decisions. I think the very logic of thought, the very fact that we are an integral part of the world we are trying to systematize, will always necessarily prevent us from knowing ahead of time the things which we are going to do.¹⁷ Even if there were no other reason, knowing what we were going to do would become an influence in itself that might prevent us from doing that very thing. So we should never fear that a deterministic outlook will allow us completely to control the behavior of others or even our own behavior.

I should also distinguish my determinism from a certain brand of fatalism that says our actions have no significance since the future is already determined. As I see it, this is the complete opposite of the view that should be taken by determinists. Determinism says that all of our actions *do* count, do actually influence everything else that happens in the world, actually could help or hinder someone in making good or bad decisions. Our actions are the very things that determine the future. The world doesn't get from A to B except through us and the part we each play. Determinism *affirms* our importance in the world. It affirms that *everything* matters in the grand scheme. As A. J. Ayer says, determinism "does not in the least entail that I am a helpless prisoner of fate. It does not even entail that my actions make no difference to the future: for they are causes as well as effects; so that if they were different their consequences would be different also."¹⁸

¹⁷ This inability to know our own future choices is probably one of the things that commonly leads us to believe in the freedom of the will. However, those who analyze these matters more carefully will hopefully take precautions against mistaking ignorance for freedom. This mistake poses a serious threat, though, since it seems highly possible that a being could think itself free, and actually be quite adamant about its freedom, when all along its decisions were being determined subconsciously. Conscious experience is such a limited tool for assessing the presence of freedom. As A. J. Ayer writes, "from the fact that a man is unaware of the causes of his action, it does not follow that no such causes exist." ("Freedom and Necessity," in *Free Will*, ed. Gary Watson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 16.)

¹⁸ "Freedom and Necessity," 23.

John Stuart Mill does an excellent job of explaining the determinist's worldview over against the fatalist's:

[Man] has, to a certain extent, a power to alter his character. Its being, in the ultimate resort, formed for him, is not inconsistent with its being, in part, formed *by* him as one of the intermediate agents. His character is formed by his circumstances...but his own desire to mould it in a particular way is one of those circumstances, and by no means one of the least influential.... [T]o think that we have no power of altering our character, and to think that we shall not use our power unless we desire to use it, are very different things, and have a very different effect on the mind.¹⁹

Mill takes care to emphasize that people can in fact be agents of change in their own lives. All that is required is the *desire* to do so, and Mill sees this desire often aroused by “experience of the painful consequences of the character we previously had—or by some strong feeling of admiration or aspiration....”²⁰ As Wright Neely puts it in his essay “Freedom and Desire,”

The degree to which we are free to alter our own desires, like the degree to which we are free to do anything else, depends on our knowledge, our circumstances, and our skills—and on our other desires which determine the price we shall have to pay. There are no more logical or metaphysical obstacles to success in making ourselves to be the kind of people we wish to be than there are to our success in making the world the kind of place in which we wish to live.²¹

Libertarians may still insist that, for our actions to be truly significant, they must be “spontaneous,” “uncaused,” the choices of a species of “unmoved mover.” But it seems to me that such an ideal not only is susceptible to the accusations of arbitrariness I’ve spent this paper discussing but also signals a fundamental valuing of difference, transcendence, abstraction, and atomistic individuality. The determinism I’m presenting is founded on a very different value: that of unity and connection, of being one facet of an interconnected and closely-knit world. Every facet is a *unique* one, unlike any other, but the emphasis is on its relationship to the rest, to the

¹⁹ *System of Logic*, Book VI, Chapter ii, Section 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Philosophical Review* (1974): 53.

role it plays in the grand scheme. I see no reason that we should value atomistic individuality over intrinsic connection with a greater whole.

Libertarians may insist that individual, autonomous freedom is necessary for moral responsibility, but the determinism I am outlining here certainly does not preclude us from making judgments about whom is most deserving of the blame for a particular event.

Determinism rather asks us to look closely at what induced a person to make the choice she did.

Was it her nature: a longstanding sense of self and values such that only a drastic change in mentality and lifestyle could have prevented the choice from being made? Or was the situation of the choice such that no matter what a person's nature, no matter the goodness of her values or intentions, she could not have avoided acting in a harmful way? Determinism says that there are causes to every moral or immoral act, but some of these causes are more related to enduring, firmly established facets of a person's self. The closeness of this relation and the extent to which the relevant personal characteristics have previously endured and will continue to endure are what is most relevant to judgments of responsibility. Our efforts to help others (and ourselves) behave in moral ways should not be efforts to disconnect ourselves completely from the world. Indeed, we can never do this. But we can work toward separating ourselves from harmful influences and subjecting ourselves to good ones, even as we concede that the extent to which we are able to do this is determined by the influences that have already formed our character.

This has by no means been a thorough outline of the deterministic position I hold to be most plausible and helpful. Nonetheless, I feel it does begin to paint a picture of how influence-determined choices can be more truly *our* choices than the arbitrary judgments of a self completely unconnected to causal influence and beyond the reach of reasons. I especially appreciate Thomas Nagel's comments on the questionable value of the libertarian ideal:

By increasing our objectivity and self-awareness, we seem to acquire increased control over what will influence our actions, and thus to take our lives into our own hands. Yet the logical goal of these ambitions is incoherent, for to be really free we would have to act from a standpoint completely outside ourselves, choosing everything about ourselves, including all our principles of choice—creating ourselves from nothing, so to speak.²²

The common libertarian view of influenced but undetermined choices leaves our most basic values unexplained and thus arbitrary. But, instead of despairing, we should set to work developing a deterministic worldview that promises more fundamental meaning in our moral and philosophical lives. There is no need to be dismayed by the “ultimate givenness of the self.”²³ Though some continue to view it as a limitation, it is truly the only starting point for a meaningful human life.

²² “The Problem of Autonomy,” in *Agents, Causes, & Events: Essays on Indeterminism and Free Will*, ed. Timothy O’Connor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 40.

²³ Ibid.